Education Subcommittee Digital Equity Taskforce Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On May 31, 2023, the first public meeting of the Education Subcommittee Digital Equity Task Force meeting took place. Monique Tate (Director of Partnerships and Engagement) and Raul Enriquez (Co-Director) of Community Tech NY served as co-facilitators to learn more about the experiences of NY residents facing the digital divide as it pertains to education. The goal of the discussion was to better inform the New York State Digital Equity Plan, a comprehensive strategy to ensure reliable, affordable, high-speed internet for all New Yorkers.

Since 2011, Community Tech NY has collaborated with local organizations in NYC, NY state, and other U.S. sites to create community owned internet infrastructure.

Overview of Discussion

Event attendees participated in breakout sessions where facilitators engaged participants to voice their perspectives on various digital equity topics. After the breakout sessions, all participants reconvened to share the most important elements of their discussions with the entire group.

Participants were also given an overview of New York State's ConnectALL Office programs including: Municipal Infrastructure & Assistance, Affordable Housing Connectivity, the Statewide Digital Equity Plan & Grant program, Rural Broadband, and Connectivity Innovation.

Breakout Group 1: Access to Broadband

This group expressed their collective frustration for how long broadband issues have been discussed publicly, and despite notable progress, still without a complete solution. The desired full coverage solution will not be reached until broadband is designated as a utility, not a luxury. This group also advocated for the creation of a consistent definition of broadband and addressed the challenges of contracting out to profit driven corporations.

Breakout Group 2: Skills & Digital Literacy

This group began by noting that the term "digital learners" encompasses more than K-12, stressing the importance of including college students, adult learners and the educators working with diverse learners in planning. Furthermore, digital fluency must be integrated into all subject areas, not strictly STEM, and includes more than computer fluency. For instance, the group highlighted knowledge of biometrics as another element of digital fluency. The group also pointed out the crucial role of educators who can help give students the foundational digital skills but may also need support and assistance themselves in being able to pass this knowledge to students. With this in mind there is an emphasis on having reliable state support to ensure responsibility on digital literacy does not fall solely on one entity. There is a desire for collaboration between the government and communities by offering services in several languages.

Breakout Group 3: Devices & Tech Support

The obsolescence cycle of devices, as Group 3 noted, drives a continuous need for tech support. In response to this challenge, Group 3 developed an accessibility vision that calls for:
- Accessible devices as the standard rather than an opt-in
- Adequate funding of systems from the state and federal levels
- Amplification of the right voices, particularly those with lived experience, in planning, decision making, and funding allocation
- Community partnerships outside of schools and additional support from libraries
- Regulations that give districts and educators sufficient flexibility

In addition to tech support, the group also focuses on providing people with meaningful devices that have vast capacities unlike cell phones which have limited capabilities. The group also points out that in addition to the costs associated with providing and maintaining devices, there are economic and environmental costs concerned with disposing of tech devices when they no longer function as they should.

They express the need for a holistic vision that reaches people who need it the most but may not be reaching out for help or cannot participate in surveys.

Breakout Group 4: Safety & Security

It is essential that personal data remain as secure as possible on the internet. Group 4 noted that as we encourage more people to enjoy the benefits of internet access, we have a

responsibility to ensure that there is awareness of safety measures and personal data accessibility. In particular, they discussed social justice and protection of minority groups on the internet. They also touched upon the friction between the government's role in providing information about safety and security online and the interest of private corporations and even government entities in data collection. Finally, they closed by noting the importance of teachers and learning resources that operate with care and empathy in order to increase accessibility.

Summary Discussion

Event attendees stressed the importance of a collaborative approach to increased broadband accessibility. Through government funding and initiatives, community partnerships and input, and collaboration with schools and educators, their vision for safe, affordable internet access is achievable.